

REVIEW ESSAY

Unearthing the Foundations of the German Enlightenment: the Recent Soundings of Martin Mulsow

Mulsow, Martin. *The Hidden Origins of the German Enlightenment*. Translated by H. C. Erik Midelfort. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023. Pp. 413.

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A widely esteemed and decorated scholar who currently directs the Gotha Research Centre at the University of Erfurt, where he is also Professor in the Cultures of Knowledge in Modern Europe, Martin Mulsow has been working for over two decades to better understand the early modern origins of contemporary European thought. *The Hidden Origins of the German Enlightenment*, his most recent English publication, is best understood as the latest installment in what is already a three-volume history of the origins of the German Enlightenment. He indicates here that a fourth book has already been finished in German and awaits translation and publication in English in the manner of his other books in this series. The bibliography lists over sixty publications authored by Mulsow, and while his work does not appear to be finished, his recent books in English mark the apex of a scholarly arc that is noteworthy for its persistent questioning of familiar interpretive paradigms and an insistent drive to offer new insights into the origins and dynamics of European Enlightenment history.

The key theme of Mulsow's revisionist agenda in the three volumes published to date can be found in their respective titles. In 2002, he published *Modern aus dem Untergrund: Radikale Frühaufklärung in Deutschland, 1680–1720*, a book that triggered Mulsow's Anglophone debut when it appeared in 2015 in an English edition translated by H. C. Erik Midelfort and retitled *Enlightenment Underground: Radical Germany, 1680–1720*. He did the same with *Prekäres Wissen: Einen andere Ideengeschichte der Frühen neuzeit* published in Berlin in 2012, turning it into *Knowledge Lost: A New View of Early Modern Intellectual History* (Princeton, 2022). The book currently under review began as a second volume of *Radikale Frühaufklärung in Deutschland, 1680–1720*, which was published in Göttingen in 2018. In this English edition translated again by Midelfort and published in 2023 by Cambridge University Press, chapter 6 from the German original has been omitted as this text is forthcoming in a new book, likely to be translated by Midelfort as well, which will be published under the title *Spinozism, Arianism, and Kabbalah: Unexpected Conjunctions in German Intellectual History of the Late Seventeenth Century* (11n21).

The Hidden Origins begins with an epigram penned by Mulsow's Erfurt colleague Dirk Sangmeister, which contends that "theoretical constructions are only stable if they are based on solid knowledge of what lies underground" (1). This dictum serves well to open the larger project of all three of these books, along with the specific interventions of this one. Mulsow's directly stated goal in all of these books is to expose the failures of the traditional grand historiographical accounts of the origins of the German Enlightenment through unexpected and ironic illuminations of the hidden, lost, forgotten, closeted, little recognized, and widely ignored underground of German intellectual history in the decades around 1700. In the introduction to this volume, titled "A New History of the Beginnings of the German Enlightenment," Mulsow offers a comprehensive overview of his project and its historiographical

agendas and targets. Standing within the traditional philosophical understanding of Enlightenment as a modernizing step in the historical development of Western thought and culture, Mulsow takes aim at what he calls the “familiar” and “standard” story of its beginnings in Germany within the changes brought by the ambitious elector Frederick III of Brandenburg with the foundation of the new University of Halle in 1694. Frederick would go on to unify the new Kingdom of Prussia and become its first king in 1701, and in the conventional story of the dawn of Enlightenment that Mulsow targets for revision, a modern progressive spirit is said to have been born from this context that would ultimately lead Prussia toward a wider role in modernizing European reform. The incubator of this new spirit was the new university at Halle during the eighteenth century, especially the empowered Faculties of Law and Philosophy that were given pride of place over Theology. This break from the traditional arrangements that had bound German Universities with Lutheran orthodoxy since the Reformation marked the dawn of a new Age of Enlightenment, or so the old story goes. In the Faculty of Law, especially, Christian Thomasius became the guiding light for change through his embrace of the natural law theories of Samuel Pufendorf and Hugo Grotius. Also important was the early introduction into the teaching of moral philosophy of the sensual understanding of self and world championed by John Locke. To traditional Lutherans, these currents of thought smacked of materialism, naturalism, and a rationalism unchecked by scriptural foundations, and by challenging these assumptions, Thomasius and his acolytes situated Halle against the grain of orthodox culture.

The alleged result was a new ecumenical form of higher learning that cast it free from the constraints of religious belief and faith, a change that became the essence of the new phenomenon soon to be called *Aufklärung* in Germany. “Radiating forth from Halle,” writes Mulsow, mimicking the standard narrative, the new progressive philosophy of Thomasius “conquered most of the Protestant States of the Holy Roman Empire.” (The absence of any consideration of the relationship of Catholicism and Catholic philosophy to the Enlightenment in Germany remains a blind spot, limiting all these books.) From this radiance, Enlightenment was born, soon spreading across Germany “until [Thomasius’s influence] was superseded by Christian Wolff in the 1720s” (1). “This story is not all wrong,” Mulsow concedes, but problematic for him is the way the account reduces Enlightenment to one particular form of it, and then treats the genesis and development of the movement overall as the singular work of one group of thinkers in one particular place at one moment time.

What is needed, Mulsow argues, is a more “polycentric” story of beginnings, one that inquires into “the individual circumstances in Germany that nourished new ideas,” including “those that were more radical than the ideas cultivated by Thomasius and his students.” “What sorts of things were thinkable [in Germany] in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries,” Mulsow asks? To answer this question is to trace the origins of Germany’s Enlightenment in new ways, he contends, and his histories seek to assemble an inventory of these innovations so as to trace the plural pathways of intellectual change at the root of these transformations. Once these hidden currents are recognized, he writes, “we will suddenly find that impulses deriving from many places and entirely unexpected persons, from little noticed topics and hitherto neglected discussions, all played a role.”

In *The Hidden Origins of the German Enlightenment*, Mulsow assembles—as he similarly did in his preceding two works—a series of individual case studies that each stand alone in offering a particularly complex illustration of how the Enlightenment in Germany was born. Each of these specific chapters tells its own story, using its own focus of analysis and vectors of argument to show how change was made, often in surprising and ironic ways. Some are like small books unto themselves, while others are miniature vignettes of specific figures and small controversies that have been erased by the sweeping work of the standard historiography. Separated as well from any unifying story or grand synthetic argument, each chapter works upon its own specific site and in its own way to show how German thought was transformed around 1700 through a process that was always varied, multifaceted, and complex. Mulsow’s case studies are very often counterintuitive, highly contingent, and even haphazardly accidental in their dynamics and outcomes, creating an overall view of Enlightenment innovation as itself multifaceted and highly contingent.

Mulsow invokes the microhistory of Carlo Ginzburg to describe his historiographical rationale, and while the comparison is apt in the way that Mulsow finds and makes visible illuminating insights hidden in the weeds of forgotten history and neglected sources, his case studies are not singular studies of how general history operates at the micro-level in the manner of *Il formaggio e i vermi*. Rather, they are specific demonstrations of how the standard story of the origins of the German Enlightenment fails to comprehend, and at times grossly misleads, when it is forced to reckon with the actual granular details of German intellectual life during these years.

If Mulsow's work is read in terms of his negative project of clearing from the fields the old and distorting historiographical edifices that hinder the sowing of a new kind of historical understanding, then there is nothing to complain about in any of his revisionist case studies. They all use creative questioning, rigorous historical research, and sharp analysis to expose the shaky foundations of the old historical understandings. Nor is there anything to criticize in his articulation of the stakes of his historiographical meta-agenda, or his teamwork with Midelfort and his academic publishers to create a series of widely available English books that offer these insightful German studies to Anglophone scholars. Yet Mulsow has bigger goals in mind, and with these, his approach encounters hindrances and obstacles. When describing the polycentric historiographical agendas he is advocating, and the scholars and scholarship he is standing with rather than trying to revise, he lists first the philosophical investigations into the history of the early Enlightenment in Germany, which is to say the traditional philosophically grounded account of the Enlightenment as a moment in the stadial development of Western modernity, a viewpoint that has dominated intellectual history as a field for over a century. In addition to this commitment, Mulsow also aspires to integrate into his work "international research" regarding the history and influence of clandestine literature in the eighteenth century, along with recent work on the European world of sociable learning and the republic of letters. Yet reconciling the first commitment with the second is no easy task, since to expand beyond the philosophical canon that anchors traditional historiography of the European Enlightenment is tantamount to dissolving its foundations as a historiographical framework altogether.

Two generations ago, the Enlightenment was unquestioningly accepted as a philosophical movement led by a series of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century men whose books and essays were seen to articulate a new kind of secular, naturalist, scientific, humanist, and rational conception of human beings and the world. This new intellectual outlook was held to be a harbinger of our contemporaneity, and within this frame, the old story about Enlightenment in Germany was told via idealist accounts of the imagined thought of philosophical men like Thomasius and Wolff, and their agency in bringing the Enlightenment articulated by John Locke and Samuel Pufendorf—along with Isaac Newton, Benedict de Spinoza, René Descartes, and others—to Germany for the first time. By wanting to save this sort of history in concept while at the same time showing us how, in practice, it fails strikingly, Mulsow is not so much revising this historiography at its core as he is reshaping the old historiographical decanters into new vessels while he refreshes the historical philosophical wine found in them.

His relationship to the work of Jonathan Israel, the academic dreadnought who has overrun traditional Enlightenment historiography over the last two decades, illustrates well Mulsow's conflicted relationship with the philosophical Enlightenment scholarship of the past and the present. Starting with his eight-hundred-page *Radical Enlightenment* (Oxford University Press, 2001), and continuing with six more histories of the Enlightenment and its legacies published between 2006 and 2019, books that together run to almost six thousand pages, Israel has injected new fuel into the old philosophical Enlightenment paradigm through his highly personal and idiosyncratic rendering of its history. For Israel, Enlightenment is the child of an immaculate conception achieved in the life and philosophy of Benedict de Spinoza, and once born its influence in generating all the modernizing values said to define Enlightenment as a transformative philosophical moment—secularism, naturalism, materialism, political liberalism, toleration, democracy, and more—are said to emerge from the providential unfolding of Spinoza's philosophical system. Israel's grossly teleological, one-dimensional, and tree-slaughtering account of Enlightenment has overtaken the field, and it sits among intellectual historians today as a sort of solitary *yokozuna*, or champion Sumo wrestler, who cannot be pushed out of the historiographical

ring even though there are no sympathizers or acolytes beyond Israel who praise the strength and power of this historiographical *rikishi*.

Mulsow's work—like that of many others—gives Israel and his interpretative leviathan respectful, if faint, praise. Israel's books, he says, are an "important advancement of knowledge" and have "undoubted merits" as a "monumental and transnational history." But after delivering these cordialities, Mulsow then devotes four pages to showing in devastating detail why Israel's account of the radical Enlightenment in northern Germany and the Baltic region is wrong in almost every respect (15–18). Similar accounts of the failure of Israel's understanding of Enlightenment abound, yet rather than asking whether these errors and interpretive misunderstandings may point to a general sclerosis plaguing the old philosophical historical conception of Enlightenment overall, Mulsow keeps his historiographical feet planted as he sets about redefining the cast of actors to be included in his study and the nature of the philosophical debates and texts that really mattered in his estimation. In sum, his revision of Israel and the larger historiographical edifice of philosophical Enlightenment overall is not really a fundamental methodological challenge at all, but a re-casting of the actors and events of the traditional old drama in new, if still familiar, scripts.

Mulsow is certainly not alone in operating in this way, and there are others like him who prefer to save the baby of an Enlightenment conceived as a historical moment in the modernizing history of philosophy while throwing out the bathwater of Israel's misguided understanding of it. Yet many others, like me, see in the solecism that is Israel's history of Enlightenment a wider set of problems within contemporary intellectual history and a corresponding need to break free from the philosophy-centered historiographical paradigms of the past.

Recent Enlightenment scholarship is also pioneering a new approach to the Enlightenment by treating it as a movement in intellectual history, no doubt, but one that was deeply social and cultural as well, and not simply a historical moment in some grand story of Western philosophy's historical modernization. Mulsow shows his inclinations in this more recent revisionist direction when he writes insightfully about the variety of genres that were used to effect philosophical change, and the way philosophy itself was changing in the eighteenth century in ways that should force historians to step out of our modern academic disciplines so as to find the Enlightenment philosophy that was contained within literary fiction, theater, historical writing, sermons, and especially in the many forms of writing and print that were becoming available as the mediascape of the eighteenth century underwent exceedingly dynamic transformations. The philosophical actors that mattered in this transformative century were also situated socially and culturally in all manner of ways, and while they included university professors, clerics, and other traditional intellectual authorities, they also included printers and bookmakers, clerks and scribes, commercial entrepreneurs, state bureaucrats and public officers, not to mention leisured aristocrats of various rank, along with self-fashioning writers who were beginning to forge for themselves a new professional identity through labor as tutors, household employees, translators, and piece writers for publishers and journals. These new writers and intellectuals who circulated in the period under the label *gens des lettres*, a reference, as Mulsow notes, to the idea of a European republic of letters as a force of change, were also sought as companions and entertainers in the salons of the elite, a space that recent historiography has highlighted as a fundamental site of Enlightenment. The latter space also included opportunities for women to participate at all levels of this emerging new media-intellectual establishment, and overall these cultural and social changes were as constitutive of Enlightenment as any shift in philosophical worldviews.

The case studies found in the *The Hidden Origins of the German Enlightenment* abound in accounts of writers and intellectuals from situations like these, and in his articulation of a project to bring these sorts of actors together with clandestine literature and the broader world of learning as manifest in the multifaceted practices of the European republic of letters, Mulsow is showing his commitment to this new strand of Enlightenment historiography. As a whole, this new literature has been working for decades to break free of the old edifices of the philosophical Enlightenment in order to reveal Enlightenment *philosophie* and learned culture as a new form of intellectual life and practice in the eighteenth century, one that was transformative in countless modernizing ways. Read through the lenses

of this new historiographical outlook, Mulsow's case studies offer ample evidence in support of this new understanding, and yet by choosing not to refresh his own thinking by asking again, as a prelude for his own revisionist thinking, what the right answer is to the fundamental question *Was ist Aufklärung?*, he fails to fully develop and exploit the deep significance and historiographical potential of his own work.

Mulsow's historical research is masterful, and the scholarly contributions made to Enlightenment historiography in this book and his others are enormous and valuable in multiple respects. Yet to return, in conclusion, to Sangmeister's epigram that launched Mulsow into this book: the question that lingers after reading *The Hidden Origins of the Enlightenment* is what exactly is the stable theoretical construction that our precise and solid historical knowledge of its underground has now led us to see? And if it is the German Enlightenment at its moment of origins, then what exactly is *Aufklärung auf Deutschland* if it is not any longer the philosophical Enlightenment of the standard historiography, or the bloated mangle of it offered by Israel?